



CRITICISM

VOLUME

129

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 129

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Poetry Criticism

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Adrienne Rich

1929-

(Full name Adrienne Cecile Rich) American poet, essayist, and critic.

For further information on Rich's life and career, see *PC*, Volume 5.

INTRODUCTION

An important and highly regarded poet, Rich has been praised for her well-crafted lyric poetry and for her treatment of contemporary social issues, particularly feminism and lesbianism. She is equally well known for her prose, and her influential work of feminist theory, *Of Woman Born* (1976), has been a mainstay of Women's Studies courses for three decades.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on May 16, 1929, the first child of Arnold Rice Rich, a pathologist and professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins, and Helen Jones Rich, a concert pianist. Although her father was Jewish, Rich and her younger sister were raised in a Christian home. Her early education was overseen at home by her mother; she did not attend school until the fourth grade when she was enrolled in the Roland Park Country School. Rich went on to Radcliffe, graduating in 1951 after which she traveled to Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship intending to study at Oxford. She changed her plans, however, and spent the remainder of her time in Europe in Italy, writing poetry. In 1953, Rich married Alfred Haskell Conrad, a Harvard economics professor, and the couple took up residence in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Two years later Rich gave birth to her first son, David, who was joined by brothers Paul in 1957 and Jacob in 1959. She began questioning her identity as a wife and mother and throughout the 1960s became increasingly radical; she was involved in civil rights activities, anti-war protests, and the feminist movement. In 1961-62 Rich received a second Guggenheim Fellowship and again traveled to Europe where she worked at the Netherlands Economic Institute. The family moved to New York City in 1964 and Conrad joined the faculty of City College. In 1967 Rich began teaching at Swarthmore and Columbia University, and a year later, she

too took a teaching position at City College. Rich's growing militancy led to the breakup of the couple's marriage in 1970 and Conrad committed suicide later that same year.

In 1976, Rich came out as a lesbian and became more and more identified with the Women's Movement, publishing the controversial and influential book of feminist theory, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Her position within the literary world as well as within the feminist movement became solidified as her writings in both poetry and prose gained popularity with readers and critics alike. Also in 1976, Rich entered into a relationship with Michelle Cliff, a novelist and editor, and the couple moved first to Massachusetts and eventually to Northern California. The pair began editing a lesbian journal and Rich continued writing and teaching at various colleges and universities, San Jose State and Stanford among them.

Rich has won numerous awards for her poetry, including the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize (1951); the Ridgely Torrence Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America (1955); the Grace Thayer Bradley Award (1956); the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award (1960); a Bollingen Foundation grant for translation (1962); the Bess Hokin Prize (1963); the Eunice Tietjens Memorial Prize (1968); the Shelley Memorial Award (1971); and the National Book Award (1974). In 1997 she was awarded the National Medal of Arts, which she refused, stating her objection to the "cynical politics" of the Clinton administration.

MAJOR WORKS

Rich's first book of poetry was *A Change of World* published in 1951 when she was a senior at Radcliffe. It was chosen for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award by W. H. Auden, who also wrote the volume's introduction. In 1955 *The Diamond Cutters*, Rich's second book of poetry, appeared, followed by *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* in 1963, a volume that was revised and reissued four years later. The book was more personal than her earlier work and revealed her growing uneasiness with the constraints of her role as a wife and mother. Her increasing activism in political and social causes informed her poetry in the later

1960s and early 1970s, including the poems of *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969), and *The Will to Change* (1971). Two years later, Rich produced *Diving into the Wreck* which won the 1974 National Book Award for Poetry, an award she shared with Allen Ginsberg. After acknowledging her sexual orientation, Rich began treating the subject of lesbian sexuality in her work, resulting in such publications as *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978)—which includes *Twenty-One Love Poems*, published a year earlier on its own—and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981). She has continued to explore questions of identity and politics in her more recent poetry, such as *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991) and *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995), both of which deal with the personal vs. the political, the private vs. the public. Rich's most recent volumes include *Midnight Salvage* (1999); *Fox* (2003); *The School Among the Ruins* (2004); *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth* (2007); and *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve* (2011).

In addition to her poetry, Rich is very well known and respected for her essays and criticism, particularly *Of Woman Born*, required reading in many Women's Studies courses, and *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979), essays on societal disapproval of same-sex relationships that forces many lesbians to hide their sexual orientation.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The role of earlier poets on Rich's work has been studied by such critics as Albert Gelpi, who lists predecessors such as Wallace Stevens, Walt Whitman, and Robinson Jeffers as the primary influences on Rich's poetic development. Gelpi notes, however, that whereas Stevens's poetry became more "hermetic" over the years as he chose "to abstract himself" from social and political issues, Rich's poetry evolved in the opposite direction as she became more and more engaged in the crises of the world. Jacqueline Vaught Brogan believes that despite Stevens's reputation as an apolitical poet, "Rich really did learn a 'radical and revolutionary' poetics from this seemingly unlikely mentor—and not in any ironic way." Barbara L. Estrin (see Further Reading) compares Rich's volume *Dark Fields of the Republic* to Samuel Beckett's *Colorless Cliff*, noting that both writers "express an ambivalence that seemed all the more urgent to convey in the post-Hiroshima, post-holocaust, years so central to their literary coming of age." Rich's volume displays that ambivalence by revisiting themes from her earlier work *Atlas of a Difficult World* and setting aside a private protected space for those individuals that the speaker holds dear, and opposing that against the

realization that "such protection is utterly selfish." Lucy Collins discusses this ambivalence between public and private by examining the differences between the original publication of *Twenty-One Love Poems* as a stand-alone volume, and its later inclusion in *The Dream of a Common Language*. The original volume "could be seen as a highly personal, even confessional, work and a candid portrait of lesbian love," according to Collins, whereas in its second appearance, the poet "politicized the sequence by its contingency with more explicitly public poetry."

Rich's ethical relationship to contemporary social and political concerns is explored by Carol Bere, who praises Rich's poetry of the 1990s for "the range and intensity of Rich's concern for human life in all of its complexity, her refusal to settle for obvious bromides, and the overriding general fearlessness of her position, which appears to intensify with each new book." Luke Spencer discusses Rich's outrage over injustice and her commitment to right wrongs through her "insistence on personal responsibility, whether for social injustice, or one's own beleaguered subjectivity." Spencer contends that "pre-eminently among the post-Auden generation, Rich was facing the painful lessons of the past with a fierce commitment to the possibility—the necessity—of change." Rich's commitment to women's rights and its articulation in her prose had, in some cases, a negative effect on the reception of her poetry according to Susan Sheridan, who notes that the publication of *Of Woman Born* "did make a negative difference to the way Rich was viewed by literary critics, especially—but not only—the men who had previously admired her."

Rich's evolution as a poet is the subject of much critical interest, since not only her subject matter but also her style has changed considerably over the sixty years of her writing career. Nick Halpern divides her career into three stages: the poetry she produced in the 1950s which "is technically accomplished but not always memorable"; the poetry of the 1960s, which "became more confident and authoritative, more serious and severe"; and her work from 1981 to the present, in which "she continues to explore the relation between prophecy and domesticity, between isolation and community." Trudi Witonsky contends that the publication of *Time's Power* in 1989 marked a turning point in Rich's literary career, a time when "she considers her own role as an ancestor in light of the insights gained via the feminist movement and subsequent critiques." Sylvia Henneberg reports that Rich herself was cognizant of the fact that her career was more or less constantly evolving; the critic quotes Rich explaining her decision to start dating her poems in the mid-

1950s: "I knew my life was changing, my work was changing, and I needed to indicate to readers my sense of being engaged in a long, continuing process."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

- A Change of World* 1951
The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems 1955
Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems, 1954-1962 1963; revised edition, 1967
Necessities of Life: Poems, 1962-1965 1966
Selected Poems 1967
Leaflets: Poems, 1965-1968 1969
The Will to Change: Poems, 1968-1970 1971
Diving into the Wreck: Poems, 1971-1972 1973
Poems, Selected and New, 1950-1974 1975
 **The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974-1977* 1978
A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems, 1978-1981 1981
The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New, 1950-1984 1984
 †*Your Native Land, Your Life* 1986
Time's Power: Poems, 1985-1988 1989
An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems, 1988-1991 1991
Collected Early Poems, 1950-1970 1993
Dark Fields of the Republic 1995
Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995-1998 1999
Fox: Poems 1998-2000 2003
The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000-2004 2004
Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004-2006 2007
Tonight No Poetry Will Serve, Poems 2007-2010 2011

Other Major Works

- Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (prose) 1976
On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978 (prose) 1979
Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985 (prose) 1986
Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations (essays) 2001
What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics (prose) 2003

A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997-2008 (essays) 2010

*This work includes *Twenty-One Love Poems*, published separately in 1976.

†This work includes the chapbook *Sources*, published separately in 1983.

CRITICISM

Carol Bere (essay date summer 2000)

SOURCE: Bere, Carol. "The Road Taken: Adrienne Rich in the 1990s." *Literary Review* 43, no. 4 (summer 2000): 550-60.

[In the following essay, Bere offers a favorable assessment of three volumes of poetry Rich published between 1991 and 1999, primarily praising Rich for the courage of her artistic and ethical convictions.]

I have never believed that poetry is an escape from history, and I do not think that it is more, or less, than food, shelter, health, education, decent working conditions. It is as necessary.

The question for the North American poet is how to bear witness to a reality from which the public—and maybe part of the poet—wants, or is persuaded it wants, to turn away.

From Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993)

Casting about for an appropriate poem about spring for his "Poet's Choice" column in the *Washington Post* (May 16, 1999), Robert Haas, former U. S. Poet Laureate, spoke of a strange dissatisfaction, a realization that with violence in Kosovo, and at home in Columbine that he needed "to read something with more salt in it and more darkness." Haas selects "**Shattered Head**," from Adrienne Rich's sixteenth, and most recent volume, *Midnight Salvage* (1999), a moving, somewhat mysterious, not necessarily transparent poem that characteristically offers no easy consolations. Like Haas, I'm not sure I fully understand the poem, although generations of human suffering, perhaps exploitation, and general indifference are implied. What is important in "**Shattered Head**," and perhaps more so throughout *Midnight Salvage*, is the range and intensity of Rich's concern for human life in all of its complexity, her refusal to settle for obvious bromides, and the overriding general fearlessness of her position, which appears to intensify with each new book.

In the rough outlines of the forty-seven line poem, a person, “a life hauls itself uphill,” coming upon a skull, “a shattered head on the breast / of a wooded hill / laid down there endlessly so / tendrils soaked into matted compost / become a root.” The poem opens out as the speaker comments:

You can walk by such a place, the earth is made of
them
where the stretched tissue of field or woods is humid
with beloved matter
the soothseekers have withdrawn
you feel no ghost, only a sporic chorus
when that place utters its worn sigh
let us have peace

Yet rather than offering facile regeneration solutions at this point, as Haas rightly suggests many poets would have, Rich concludes with a response from the “unappeased” skull:

And the shattered head answers back
*I believed I was loved, I believe I loved,
who did this to us?*

Unappeased, resolutely discontent, bold, revolutionary—all of these terms could be applied to Rich, who described herself in the critical sequence, “**Sources**” (1981-82), as the woman “with a mission, not to win prizes, but to change the laws of history.” For almost fifty years, Rich’s fierce intelligence has been leading the way for generations of poets, challenging received ideals, changing lives, giving voice to the disenfranchised. Always, her effort has been to connect: to discover relationships between the tangled, fragmented peripheries of our inner lives and the seemingly unrelated events of history; to understand the interdependencies of our sexual and political lives; and, perhaps with renewed or more reconsidered focus in recent years, to achieve a voice that is at once both intensely personal *and* public (interview with Montenegro).

Rich’s career (and life) has been marked by major shifts in gear: from early beginnings as a prodigiously talented, somewhat traditional poet to a far more experimental, even revisionist poet; from marriage to lesbian, feminist, and outspoken political activist; and from young wife, mother, and daughter who was “Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew, / Yankee nor Rebel” to later reclaimant of her Jewish roots. Criticism of Rich has also followed a similar trajectory: advocates of the earlier Rich now mourn the loss of her more “comfortable” poems; radical feminist (and largely favorable) critics of Rich have divided some readers; for others, she has been a bellwether of women poets’ potential for power and influence. Charges of excessive didacticism dogged her middle and, to some extent, later career, and for some critics, undercut the scope of her achievement.

Yet with little attention to the bottom line, Rich has made it clear, says poet Carol Muske, that “she is in possession of a quality that few American poets are ever called upon to reveal—courage. She has had the courage to turn her back on a literary ‘future’ that seemed established and undertake a whole new definition of the future of poetry. She has had the courage to stand up to her detractors and critics for whom misogyny was a cultural imperative, and make it stick” (Muske). And at seventy, when many poets might be bogged down in self-reflection or be deemed guilty of repetition, Rich has risen above the noise, “kept the dialogue going,” probing the world through her poetry, using longer, more expansive poetic forms, more innovative combinations of language, exploring the issues, “which after all are our lives.” In the 1990s alone, Rich has produced three volumes of poetry and a collection of prose: *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991); *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993); *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995); and *Midnight Salvage* (1999).¹ Another volume of prose, *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*, will be published early in 2001.

Rich’s more recent work continues the conversation, moves across a continuum, perhaps with a more public voice, to explore issues of poetry and activism, or more specifically, the relationship of the participatory spirit to the creative act, the desire to forge a truly integrative, realized poetry, and somewhat surprisingly to critics of Rich, the possibilities for happiness. To a large extent, the poems in *Atlas*, *Dark Fields*, and *Midnight Salvage*, suggest Rich’s belief of the power of poetry as a communal art. The most successful poems are essentially poems for representative voices, or “a theatre of voices,” that open out far beyond academic confines or interpretation.

Rich comments that in *Atlas* “I was trying to talk about the location, the privileges, the complexity of loving my country and hating the ways our national interest is being defined for us” (interview with Rothschild). The sweep of the opening title poem, a thirteen-part sequence is all-encompassing, ranging over American landscape and history, moving from personal to national concerns, from local to more universal positions. The historical and personal blur as Rich, “bent on fathoming what it means to love my country,” moves across the geography of the land, questioning received values, reflecting on shared history. Her scope is wide: from present-day California, where the planes dust the strawberries, “each picked by a hand”; to “farms of rust and stripping paint” in Vermont; to the “map of the country,” a grim “mural” of wars, missiles, foreclosed farms, and depressing “suburbs of acquiescence.”

Written during and after the Gulf War, the sequence concludes with the incantatory, pulsing Whitmanesque rhythms of “**Dedications**” (quoted in part):

I know you are reading this poem
late before leaving your office

I know you are reading this poem which is not in
your
guessing at some words while others keep you reading
and I want to know which words they are.
I know you are reading this poem listening for
something, torn
between bitterness and hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.
I know you are reading this poem because there is
nothing else left to read
there where you have landed, stripped as you are.

Asked about “**Dedications**,” Rich responded that her objective was to speak to “people as individuals, but also-as individuals multiplied over and over . . . As part of a collectivity.” In the last line, Rich commented that she first thought of someone with AIDS, or anyone in an isolated situation where only a book of poetry kept her / him in contact with the world. “But finally, I was thinking of our society, stripped of so much of what was hoped for and promised and given nothing in exchange but material commodities. And for me, that is being truly stripped” (interview with Moyers).

The concerns of *Atlas* lead directly into *What is Found There*, twenty-eight essays, letters, and excerpts from journals in which Rich says “I’ve been coming out as a poet, a poet who is a citizen, a citizen who is a poet,” and questioning “how do those identities come together in a country with the particular traditions and attitudes regarding poetry that ours has” (interview with Rothschild). In characteristically direct, straightforward language, Rich speaks of her own growth and development as a poet, of the relationship between poetry and activism, of the need to reconcile activism and poetry itself—the conscious and the unconscious work—and the response and, to some extent, responsibility of the poet in a country where poetry, “like our past, our collective memory . . . remains an unfathomed, a devalued, resource.”

From a starting premise that poetry is little more than a marginal activity in the U.S., where poets lead “interstitial lives,” often strapped for time and money, Rich explores the role and ultimately collective power of poetry. She talks of the influence of Muriel Rukeyser, the most “integrative,” unheralded of poets, and, to some extent, of other principled activists such as Barbara Deming, Alva Myrdal, poets June Jordan and Audre Lord, and poet-politician, Vaclav Havel. *What Is Found There* is also an effective barometer of Rich’s own “education” as a poet: from the early questioning

of the high gods of modernism such as T. S. Eliot and Williams; to the initial liberating influence of Stevens, and later understanding and repudiation of his racial language; to being a major participant in the women’s communal poetry and publishing movement. Rich’s poetic methods also shifted accordingly from a somewhat ordered formalism to increasing use of more open forms, and often fragmented language. Throughout Rich seems to have accepted that poetry was a necessity, a “fierce, destabilizing force, a wave pulling you further out than you wanted to be,” suggesting, imploring, “*You have to change your life.*” And in the final section, “What if?” Rich pushes further, exploring poetry of revolution, poetry of change, poetry that describes what is, and indicates what can be. In a somewhat Shelleyan mood, Rich concludes with a suggestion of the ideal, the transformative capabilities of the “revolutionary” poet, as cited in the following excerpt from *What is Found There*:

Over so many millennia, so many cultures, humans
have reached into preexisting nature and made art: to
celebrate, to drive off evil, to nourish memory, to
conjure the desired visitation.

The revolutionary artist, the relayer of possibility, draws
on such powers, in opposition to a technocratic
society’s hatred of multiformity, hatred of the natural
world, hatred of the body, hatred of darkness and
women, hatred of disobedience. The revolutionary poet
loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees
inseparably from art, is not ashamed of any of these
loves, and for them conjures a language that is public,
intimate, inviting, terrifying, and beloved.

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With *Dark Fields of the Republic*, which takes its title from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Rich continues her dialogue with America, speaking again as a citizen, questioning received values, in a voice which is “a form of despair, not resignation.” At the same time, the poems range further, assuming a more global historical stance for her “theatre of voices,” conversations with other women, interrogations of war, the Holocaust, guilt, and responsibility. Rich’s note to the sequence “**Then or Now**,” drawn in part from correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, announces what I take to be the thematic thread of many of the poems in the volume, the urgency or need to respond to “the continuing pressure of events.” The opening poem, “**What Kind of Times are These**,” (quoted in part) with its references to Brecht and Mandelstam sets the stage, in a sense, for the tone of the book, in direct, although occasionally somewhat hyperbolic language:

There’s a place between two stands of trees where the
grass grows uphill
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows

near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted
who disappeared into those shadows.
I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of
the woods
meeting the unmarked strip of light—
ghost-ridden cross-roads, leafmold paradise:
I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, disappear.

And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you
anything? Because you still listen, because in times
like these
to have you listen at all, it's necessary
to talk about trees.

The volume, with a few exceptions, comprises sequences, which move from historical events to local, personal references, in language that is innovative, complex, and often fragmented. The dream visions of *Calle Vision*, alternate with “Six Narratives,” stories which debate questions of war, of love, interpretation, of ownership of the story, as “we are thrown together so we are racked apart / in a republic shivering on its glassy lips / parted as if the fundamental rift / had not been calculated from the first into the mighty scaffold.”

In the powerful, concluding six-part sequence, “Inscriptions,” Rich moves beyond boundaries of nation, of self, to create a mosaic of voices, engaging notions of global history, political memory, of political process itself. From the deliberative opening, with its use of the indeterminate “you,” Rich implies solidarity, connections: “Little as I knew you I know you: little as you knew me you / know me /—that’s the light we stand under when we meet . . . My testimony: yours: Trying to keep faith / not with each other exactly yet it’s the one known and unknown / who stands for, imagines the other with whom faith could / be kept.”

The voices and perspectives range wide—from personal memories, fragments of conversation, and occasional, effectively used direct quotes from other poets such as the line of Auden, which conclude “History,” the fourth poem: (*When shall we learn, what should be clear as day, / We cannot choose what we are free to love?*) The tone also builds throughout the sequence from the calm, reflective opening, “Little as I knew you I know you,” to the confrontation with death in the final poem, “Edgellit,” where Rich shifts into high gear: “Remember me . . . O,O,O / O remember me / these vivid stricken cells / precarious living marrow / this my labyrinthine filmic brain / this my dreaded blood / this my irreplaceable / footprint vanishing from the air.”

For this reader, the second section, “Movement,” sets forth most persuasively the transformational nature of politics, the need for reconsideration of positions, of

history, of political engagement that is at the heart of “Inscriptions.” As Homi Bhabha has pointed out, it is the achievement or “subtle manoeuvre of the poem that we don’t fall into the fixations of ‘identity politics’ and are open to thinking of politics as a complex process of identification—a reaching out to differences other than our own. The ‘subject’ of the poem, is, literally, the sphere of proximity of differences—race, class, gender, generation—as they emerge in a range of intersecting places . . . that render contingent the authority of both her identity and her historical location, or territoriality” (Homi Bhabha).

Old backswitching road bent toward the ocean’s light
Talking of angles of vision movements a black or a
red tulip

Opening
Times of walking across a street thinking
Now I have joined a movement but I am stepping in
this deep current
Part of my life washing behind me terror I couldn’t
swim with
part of my life waiting for me a part I had no words
for
I need to live each day through have them and know
them all
though I can see from here where I’ll be standing at
the end.

When does a life bend toward freedom? grasp its
direction?
How do you know you’re not circling in pale dreams,
nostalgia,

stagnation
but entering that deep current malachite, colorado
requiring all your strength wherever found
your patience and your labor
desire pitted against desire’s inversion
all your mind’s fortitude?
Maybe through a teacher: someone with facts with
numbers

with poetry
who wrote on the board: IN EVERY GENERATION-
ACTION

FREES OUR DREAMS
Maybe a student: one mind unfurling like a redblack
peony
quenched into percentile, dropout, stubbed-out bud
—Your journals Patricia: Douglas your poems: but the
repeti-

tive blows
on spines whose hope you were, on yours:
to see the quenching and decide.
—And now she turns her face brightly on the new
morning in
the new classroom
new in her beauty her skin her lashes her lively body:
Race, class . . . all that . . . but isn’t that just his-
tory?
Aren’t people bored with it all?

She could be
myself at nineteen but free of reverence for past ideas
ignorant of hopes piled on her She’s a mermaid